

How to
grow

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The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

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Inquiring Words An attempt at meditation

Silence

That bull-rush in the flower vase under the pulpit looks just like a sausage from here

There's an idea, bangers and mash for lunch, washed down with a tepid beer

Didn't I do that last Sunday? When I realised I hadn't got enough cash to buy a roast
No that was the week before, I think, no, but three weeks ago at the very most

Wait! Stop it, stop it, here I am in the middle of a service in the silence
meditation

And am I worrying about global peace & worldly warming in thoughtful contemplation?

No! I can't stop thinking about dinner, it's after that last reading, the one about

How we're going to have a world famine because the new climate is going to cause a drought

I bet the rest of the congregation here are right now thinking goodly things

Happy thankful peaceful thoughts about all the wonders that their God brings

It's too noisy for me right now, not outside, I mean inside, the silence I need now in my head

In a few moments, I am meant to dump all the woes in my world, to think nice thoughts instead

If nothing else, I am normally worrying the dog will start to snore

Or he'll start that embarrassing licking he does while thumping a back leg on the floor

And all I can do is give him a bit of a light kick and while I don't think that's mean

I know what an outcry there will be after the service, over coffee, if I were seen

At least there are no deaf-aid whistles or sneezing this week, that always puts me off

Or that annoying quick fumble for the hanky just before an apologetic cough

I'm not in a good mood today am I? Not much tolerance going on inside me!

So am I feeling guilty about that? Yes do you know what, I am, and rightly – I should be

OK, so what are you going to do about it mate? Think of something! NOW – just keep you sane

Concentrate for a moment, so then may be, this part of the service will not have been in vain

– James Barry
(Tongue planted firmly in cheek)



Andy Pakula (centre) with his congregation.

Seven steps to growth

Ant Howe and Andy Pakula lead rapidly growing congregations. Here, they offer seven principles to try in your community.

Who wants growth?

You want your congregation to grow. You're worried – anxious about its future. Maybe you have gone to a 'growth day' at the annual meetings and have returned home with a few ideas to try and some enthusiasm, but it hasn't led to much. You suspect that there's more to growth than tweaking a few things here and there. You're right. It is not as simple as improving a sign or a web site, and yet we are convinced that growth is possible in almost any Unitarian congregation if the right approach is taken. In this article, you will find seven principles and other useful advice to help you do just that. As a movement, we have been talking about growth for some time now. In 2006, our General Assembly passed a resolution calling upon every congregation and organisation to give a high priority to numerical growth and for the Executive Committee to create an organisation and process around the promotion of numerical growth. We want growth. If only it were that simple... Growth is a subject that brings up some very mixed feelings. Some of our congregations seem to be happy as they are. Some have concluded that it is impossible to grow in their context and circumstances. Some are simply exhausted and lack the energy and enthusiasm that is needed for growth. But if the commitment is there to make it happen, growth is very possible.

Principles for growth

This article has been written collaboratively by two Unitarian Ministers – Ant Howe and Andy Pakula. We are very, very different people and the congregations we serve are also extremely different, but both of us have presided over dramatic numerical growth over the past few years. Attendance at Kingswood trebled in three years. Membership at Newington Green and Islington doubled in about 2.5 years. We collaborated on this article to offer what we see as the seven key principles for growth in British Unitarian congregations. In many ways, these principles are straightforward and

simple. They are also hard. They are hard because success requires something from your community's attitude or culture – and changing that can be the most difficult of changes to make. We are convinced that growth is possible in almost any Unitarian congregation, but the changes in our hearts needed to make that happen can be wrenching.

Like chalk and cheese...

How different are the authors as ministers and as people? One of us is a minister in a city congregation and one in a semi-rural congregation. One of us is a Christian Unitarian and the other is a very eclectic universalist Unitarian. One is gay and one is straight. One is English and one is American. One was trained by the British GA and the other mostly by the Unitarian Universalists in America. One is brilliantly musical and the other... well... isn't. One is in his 30s and the other is in his 50s. One was raised in the Christian tradition and the other in the Jewish tradition. One eats meat, the other is a vegetarian. The ways we are alike may be fewer than the ways we differ! We have both learned about church growth from books, seminars and from observation, and we have learned a great deal from doing it. We and our congregations have done experiments; we've tried things that either worked or didn't and then moved on from there.

It's about 'them'

The single most essential thing that we have recognised is that the purpose of your congregation must focus on something far more expansive than the people who make up the congregation today. Growth comes after you are very certain that your purpose is not simply to make and maintain a comfortable place for the people that are already there. If your only reason for wanting growth is to get more people like the current members so that the congregation can survive and not change, you will surely fail. We both believe passionately in Unitarianism as an important, essential, and even world-changing movement. We are convinced that becoming part of a Unitarian congregation can change lives for the better. We believe that if Unitarian values spread, we will have a better, happier, more loving world. Given these convictions growth is, for us, a religious obligation! And so our focus is not only on the existing members of the

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Start on the seven steps

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congregation, but on the people who could and, some day, will be members. This leads to our first principle of growth:

1. In every decision, consider the people who could become members of the congregation

This principle may sound simple. It is probably the most important one. It is probably also the hardest one to accomplish because of the internal and cultural change it calls us to make. The focus of the congregation must change from 'us' to 'them' – not because we want them to help sustain us, but because we want them to find a faith that will change their lives and help change the world.

One size does not fit all!

In some ways, growth is simple: get enough visitors and get them to stay! But behind this rather obvious statement, a great deal of thought and effort is required. Fortunately, it is also rather straightforward. The most important consideration is that not everything appeals to everyone. You cannot simply get and retain visitors by doing what you are already doing and making it known. This leads to our second principle:

2. Know as much as you can about the people you are trying to attract

For example, the approach that works brilliantly for middle-aged former Anglicans does not work for unchurched young adults. While these two groups include a great deal of variety within them, we also know that there are huge differences between them. The members of these groups will generally respond to different messages, rely on different media, have different needs and interests, and will be satisfied by different congregational experiences. You will only be effective in attracting and retaining visitors if you design your approach for those particular people.

Do everything with quality

And while we insist that thinking about your 'target' audience is essential, there are also some general attributes and principles that will be important for almost all groups of potential new members. This brings us to the third principle:

3. Get the basics right

The basics are those things that are often obvious to anyone new, but that you may no longer notice if you've attended for more than a few years. The basics include:

- A pleasant-looking building
- A lack of obvious conflict
- Excellence in worship and other programmes
- Obvious cues of what to do in worship – where to go when
- Protecting visitors from awkward members
- A welcome from the pulpit
- A warm welcome at the door and in coffee hour from a person with a good personality (and good personal hygiene.)

Know why you're here

If you have got the basics right and have attracted people, they will probably come back at least a few times. This does not, however, mean that they will become fully integrated in the congregation and become members. Retaining them requires more than just the basics. The congregation must

be a place where people feel they can live out their values, grow spiritually, contribute meaningfully, and be known and cared for. Creating congregations like this is the difficult work of the ministry that we must all do. It comes about in a continuous way and is built by all the members of the community, no matter how long they have been there. A key factor in creating this healthy culture is to be clear about who you are and what your purpose is. Our fourth principle:

4. Clarify your congregation's purpose and communicate it clearly and often

You may not already have a clear sense of purpose for your congregation. This is important work to do. Find someone to act as an outside facilitator and work on this. When you have developed a clear sense of purpose, try a variety of ways to bring this into the lives and consciousness of every member. Make sure that whatever it is, it stays alive in the congregation. Maybe you can formulate this purpose into a short statement that appears on church literature and is used as an affirmation during each service.

Get ready to give up

It is obvious that there are many things we need to do in order to grow our congregations numerically. There are also many beliefs and ways of being that will prevent growth and drive people away. Some of these are the same things that we have come to see as 'the way we do things.' Successfully achieving growth can mean giving up some comfortable and familiar ways of being. The fifth principle:

5. Be prepared to give up the things that prevent growth

Many of us tend to say that our congregation is like a 'family.' While this may be comfortable for those who have belonged for a long time, we must recognise that a family is one kind of group to which new people can not easily obtain access! If your congregation is a family, expect the visitor to feel like the not-so-welcome new brother-in-law!

The way we govern our congregation may have to change. If newcomers feel that an 'in group' controls everything and that it is too hard to get permission to do something new, they will leave. We need to be prepared to relax control to encourage new members. The Committee cannot and should not do or control everything. Let new seeds of initiative and creativity take root throughout your congregation.

Remember that the things that work in a smaller congregation might not work in a larger congregation. For example, 'sharing services' where everyone brings a poem or reading work well when there are 10 people but not so well when there are 50! You can transfer these much-loved rituals to smaller midweek groups where they will continue to work well.

There may well be aspects of your worship or other activities that you will need to let go of. If you are aiming to attract young adults, for example, their musical tastes need to be taken into account. You can be sure that they will not be the same as those of most elderly Unitarians. If you are trying to attract Christians specifically, and have always begun your service with an Earth Spirit ritual, you might need to reconsider that. If you are interested in people who don't identify with Christianity, you will need to consider whether your routine use of the Lord's Prayer really makes sense any more.

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Ant Howe (left toward the back in clerical collar) with his congregation. Photo by Bob Edwards

Expect resistance to church growth

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People will be upset - and that's OK

We need to give up the idea that the most important thing is that nobody gets upset. Change is uncomfortable. Growth can be uncomfortable. In many congregations, disruptive behaviour that repels newcomers is tolerated. To grow, we have to recognise that welcoming people into our congregation is more important than keeping that badly behaved individual from getting upset and perhaps even leaving the congregation. Giving up the idea that no one should be upset is so important and central that it deserves its own principle:

6. The good of the group must come first

Democracy is an important value of ours and it is not synonymous with unanimity. Strive to do what is best for the whole community without being held back by minority views that do not serve the purpose of the congregation. Identify the ways your congregation is held back by the interests of one or a small group of people. Commit, as a leadership group and as a congregation, that you will act for the best interest of the group and not these individuals. Make the tough decisions that will benefit the congregation and thereby benefit all of its members.

Look out for the backlash

Now that you have done everything right, people are flocking to your congregation and staying. You may find to your dismay that several of the old-timers have begun doing some odd things. They may be acting angrily toward newcomers. They may have begun complaining about some of them. You are experiencing resistance to growth. Be prepared!

7. Expect resistance to growth

No matter how much everyone said they wanted growth, when it really starts happening, it can be disorienting and downright uncomfortable. After all, isn't this your congregation? Well, no, it isn't. It's *their* congregation too and all of a sudden, you have to consider their different views on everything. You are about to lose control over 'your' congregation. This is much like having a child grow up and become independent. It is difficult to bite your lip some times but you must recognise that what is right for you is not necessarily right for the congregation. With increased numbers also come a variety of changes

that may make people feel a sense of loss. For example, the minister can no longer give personal pastoral care to every person. This can be a very hard change to accept. The best way to manage resistance to growth is to talk about it openly. Talk about it before it happens. Make sure everyone knows that it is likely. Almost everyone eventually feels some resistance – even the strongest proponents of growth. Find ways to surface this resistance and respond to it with love and compassion.

What about ministers?

We are both ministers. Are ministers essential for growth? If you don't have a minister, does that mean that there is no hope? The congregations that have grown definitively and robustly have ministers. Our understanding of this is that growth requires 1) high quality, consistent worship; 2) someone who can speak the truth in love; 3) someone to hold the vision; and 4) someone who knows what they're doing and is ready to do a lot of work! Does this have to be a minister? No, but usually it will be. If someone else is available, willing, and qualified to do all this and doesn't have 'the Rev' before their name, great! That can work too. If you don't have someone like that, our advice is that you follow our principles as well as you can on your own with the intention of getting large and healthy enough to have at least part-time ministry and then to continue growing until you can get full-time ministry.

Growth is not about growth

In the final analysis, growing a congregation is not simply a matter of focusing on growth. Yes, you must focus on various growth-specific concerns like attracting new people, keeping in touch with them, and helping them to find a way into the congregational life. But the process of growth is ultimately a journey of congregational transformation. The successfully growing congregation is one that understands itself as having a purpose far beyond itself and a knowledge that it is doing sacred, holy work in the world. It is our hope that all of our congregations, no matter what size, will recognize that this is truly what they are here to do.

The Rev Ant Howe is minister at Kingswood and Warwick.

The Rev Andy Pakula is minister at New Unity – Newington Green and Islington.

Clip 'n' save



Guide to growth

Putting it all Together

A brief general summary of some of the steps you can take to grow. More specific ideas and suggestions are readily available in books and on the internet. Most importantly, we hope that you will get started. Growth needs a consistent focus on these principles. You will probably find it most helpful to empower a small group or your minister to lead growth initiatives and keep these considerations in front of the congregation.

1. In every decision, consider the people who could become members of the congregation

- Work to help your congregation understand that sharing our faith and our communities is a religious obligation.
- In every decision, consider the needs and interests of the people who are not yet in the congregation.
- Emphasise that we are only the current stewards of Unitarianism. We must prepare to pass it on to the next generation of stewards and give them the freedom to make it a culturally relevant embodiment of Unitarianism's timeless core principles.

2. Know as much as you can about the people you are trying to attract

- Consider the population of your area. Learn about who lives within a reasonable distance of your location and who might benefit from becoming part of the congregation.
- Choose one or at most two types of population. Learn all you can about about them: their tastes, needs, etc.
- Use this information to reshape the way you present your congregation to the public, and consider how you can change the way you conduct your worship and other programmes to better suit this target population.
- When they start coming, find out how they respond. Use their responses as further input into your planning.

3. Get the basics right

- Get an objective outsider's view of everything you do.
- Fix anything you can that might confound a newcomer or make them uncomfortable.
- Do what you can to improve the visible deficits of your facilities.
- Address conflict in the congregation rather than sweeping it under the rug. Get help if you need it.

4. Clarify your congregation's purpose and communicate it clearly and often

- Help your congregation to recognise that Unitarianism has much to give the world and that we who are currently in the movement are not here only to meet our own needs.
- Develop a clear compelling congregational purpose or mission through a process that gives everyone the opportunity to provide input.
- Repeat your purpose at every possible opportunity to make sure it becomes a living understanding of the congregation.

5. Be prepared to give up the things that prevent growth

- Look out for the 'we've always done it this way' syndrome and recognise the power of inertia to prevent things from changing. Make sure that is not an acceptable justification for preventing change.
- Examine your programmes and actions as though they had just been proposed for the first time. If they wouldn't be put in place now, it is time to change them.
- Put new initiatives on an equal footing with old ways.

6. The good of the group must come first

- Commit to good decision-making processes and do not give anyone the power of a veto.
- Meet upsets with compassion and love, but do not veer from a wisely chosen course because a few people are upset.

7. Expect resistance to growth

- Talk about the discomfort of change and growth before it happens to help people be prepared for it.
- When it happens, respond with compassion and love, but be clear about the behaviour expected from members of the congregation.

– Ant Howe and Andy Pakula

View from the pew

Consider what a visitor sees



By Neville Kenyon

I have been in the fortunate position of visiting a cross-section of our congregations over the past several years as a member of the Executive Committee and latterly as GA vice president.

Perhaps my most significant discovery has been that every single Unitarian congregation is completely different and has a unique ethos!

I learn something useful on every visit – and not just from the sermon.

I am pleased to report that some of our churches are immaculate in every way! But we should always bear in mind that there are some aspects of hospitality over which members have some control and some which are more difficult to influence.

For example notice boards can be refurbished quickly and relatively inexpensively with little opposition from the awkward members, whereas that hideous Victorian biblical quotation in gold leaf on the reredos might cause a bit of a stir if you were to suggest its removal.

A major part of the welcome visitors receive is inherent in the general appearance of the building and the tidiness of the surroundings. This is usually understood but it amazes me how little attention some of our congregations give to simple, inexpensive touting up procedures. Many of our buildings have architectural merit and it does not necessarily cost a lot to give them kerb appeal.

If you have a lot of land surrounding your church which you have difficulty keeping tidy, find a local group who will do it for you! In Bury, one of the Rotary Clubs tidies up the gardens adjacent to our church on a regular basis. They have a little plaque with a Rotary roundel stating that they do this. The local authority will give advice on whom to contact for this kind of help. Sidmouth is an example of a town centre chapel which was supported by the local authority in tidying the forecourt. It is the town's interest to ensure that its streets and buildings are kept tidy – especially if it competing in the Britain in Bloom competition.



In his capacity as vice president of the Unitarian General Assembly, Neville Kenyon has visited congregations across the country. Here he details some of what he found. Photo by John Hewerdine

Now, what about the inside? Let's hope we agree that there is a basic level of cleanliness beneath which none of us would venture. The contrast between those churches with polished woodwork on the pews and those preferring the dusty, natural look is definitely discernable. But what about the seat covers? Is there a consistency or have some got scatter cushions placed there by the regular pew dwellers? Are some given a new brightness by deploying coloured carpet donated by a church committee member who is fortunate to have purchased a new carpet for his or her living room and has generously decided to donate some off-cuts of the old carpet to refurbish some of the pews? The fact that the carpet is grotesque is something that Unitarians are often too polite to mention.

Some of our meeting rooms have their floor completely covered with a variety of discarded domestic carpets giving them an interesting patchwork effect. The extendable oak dining tables and be-cushioned dining chairs certainly exude a homely feel. The single barred electric fires with

rusty reflectors don't give out much heat. It's horrible to a visitor but no doubt seems lived-in by the regulars – who are, unsurprisingly, becoming fewer in number.

A chapel I attended recently made me aware that there is no need for carpet or cushion in the pews either on the seats or floor. At least to be without is consistent, and surely none of us would suffer too greatly from a one-hour service sitting on an unpadded seat. On balance, I believe it is better to have no cushioning in pews rather than have carpet oddments. The best option would be to have top-quality matching furnishings compatible with the architectural standard of the building.

After one service I attended, during a warm weather period, when I tried to rise I found my jacket was stuck to the back of the pew. By slipping it off I was able to peel the jacket away from the pew in gradual delicate stages. I was told that this was a normal phenomenon. I suspected it was a subtle ploy to

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Neville's view from the pew

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prevent people from making a hasty retreat during the sermon.

Then there is what I call "the depository pew". What can our chapel do when we have filled all possible storage space in the school hall and the church gallery? It's obvious – some of the pews are so rarely occupied on a Sunday that we might as well fill them with extraneous rubbish. Remember "Orders of Worship"? Seldom used these days but in too good a condition to throw out – so let's store them in that pew with all the other clutter. And when that's full there are still plenty of other vacant pews so there's no need to throw anything away. And as the congregation diminishes there is even more storage space available.

The message must be to clear out your junk as it accumulates. The town's recycling facilities are mostly convenient these days. Bite the bullet and persuade your committee to get rid of the accumulated rubbish.

Archives are another issue. We at Bury have given all ours to the local council archivist who has catalogued them and we are allowed to borrow them for special occasions when required.

Perhaps we might consider that one of the reasons why some of our places of worship fail to be regenerated by newcomers is that the simple things we do wrong are enough to put people off from returning after that first visit. And I have so far referred only to the very simple basic issues.

Two chapels I have visited sell second-hand books as part of their fund raising efforts. These books are stored in the pews – not on the ground floor but in the gallery, in neat rows. They are part of the essence of the chapels and have an important purpose, not just more junk.

I have previously stated in a presentation to the Unitarian Renewal Group that I feel it imperative that we should ensure that our services are identifiable as different from those of other non-conformists. This is what I refer to as "the clear blue water" syndrome. In this connection I find it interesting to reflect on the use of the prayer of Jesus in our worship. If, as Peter Godfrey indicated in a letter to *The Inquirer*, Unitarians find it difficult to believe in the efficacy of intercessionary prayer why is the prayer of Jesus so central in most Unitarian services? Those congregations using the Red Hymn Book can really show visitors how Christian and similar to all the rest we actually are.

Let's go a step further and see how we can try really hard to put people off returning for a second time.

Do we seriously expect that visitors will never need to answer a call of nature when they come to one of our services? Some of our toilets are really appalling. Even the most basic town pub or lower division football club now has toilet facilities that could be classed as generally acceptable. Some of our church buildings do not. I refrain from saying more.

Please improve your loos. Unfortunately, I can think of more bad ones than good ones on my visits. I do realise that there can be big money involved in installing decent lavatories but such facilities must be high on the list of impressions that we give that turn people away.

Now, how about the Free Welcome Pack? What an excellent idea. So what should we include in it? I know – for a start an old copy of *The Inquirer* and an even older copy of the *Unitarian*. Then there are the old church newsletters so let's include a couple in the welcome pack. What else? – Oh, I know,

'Do we seriously expect that visitors will never need to answer a call of nature when they come to one of our services?'

we now have lots of new coloured leaflets to the Unitarian Consistent Identity and we get them free from Essex Hall. The problem is that we still have plenty of the old outdated leaflets left. I know, let's use them up by including them in the free welcome pack. **I only wish this really was an exaggeration.** If we decide to offer a welcome pack then we must ensure that it is bang up to date – the latest *Inquirer*, *Unitarian*, church magazine, leaflets – inserted that day by the steward – not something prepared earlier a few months ago. Another thing to remember about these welcome packs is "don't give out too much". People can be over faced by a pack containing every single leaflet we can lay our hands on. You need to agree a strategy for welcoming – including the contents of the pack. Displayed hymn numbers should be consistent – too many are dog-eared and filthy. We allow this because we are so close to them every week that we don't see the blemishes. To have matching, clean hymn numbers displayed is now so easy with the aid of a computer.

Unfortunately I have experienced a couple of instances of actual hostility. Once when taking photographs of church notice boards and once when on a visit to a Heritage Open Day. The reception I received, as a perfect stranger, from individual "Unitarians" was rude and aggressive.

Had I been an interested enquirer having seen, say, our national web pages and popped in to find out what was actually on offer, I would have run a mile.

My gut feeling is that I have been unfortunate to come across such intolerance and that these people are in the minority. But it is very worrying that even when we have our notice boards glowing, our pews immaculate, our toilets sparkling and our congregations fully trained in hospitality, we can be so let down at the grass roots by sheer hostility towards strangers. That belies all that we stand for as a community.

We Unitarians pride ourselves in being up to date and of the age we live in. Unfortunately by no means all the places I have visited reflect this. Our forms of service are generally similar to other non conformists, many of our chapels and churches look similar to theirs – these are relics of our history. But we can still smarten them up both inside and outside – and how about improving the lighting? Those rusty convection heaters don't help either. Let's begin to behold our image through the eyes of a stranger. Would we return from our first visit?

And finally – twice at different places I have almost been locked in the premises – once in the grounds and once in the chapel itself. It seems that some congregations simply can't get home fast enough and lock up without necessarily ensuring that everyone has departed. The threat of being held up until the place was reopened a week later would surely unnerve the most persistent seeker of truth. At least, if the church was a Fair Trade establishment, they wouldn't go hungry.

Neville Kenyon is the vice president of the General Assembly.
He originally offered this piece as a talk at the Unitarian
Renewal Group gathering in October.

Essex Hall board closes Martineau

Statement from the Management Committee of Essex Hall

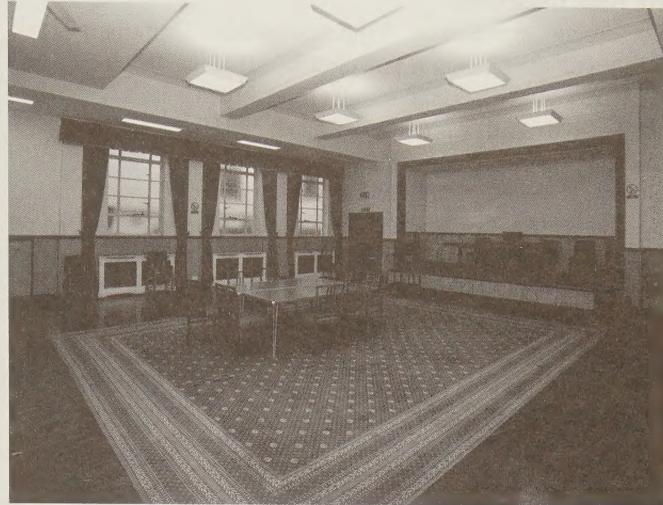
Essex Hall Trustees met on 16 February and made the decision, subject to the completion of satisfactory commercial negotiations with the prospective tenant, to let the Martineau Hall as office space. This long-term decision was made following consultation with stakeholders and with the participation and full consensus of both the Management Committee and the other attending trustees. All of the consultation responses were made available to the meeting. The decision was reached after the Management Committee had answered many points raised by the other trustees.

Essex Hall is facing a very different letting market situation than in past years. During the past two decades major building developments have created a glut of modern well-serviced office space, leaving our 50 year-old utility-style building at the lower end of the letting market. The rent per square foot per annum prevailing today is about half of that enjoyed 10 years ago. Lease periods are shorter, there are more unoccupied periods. Maintenance costs are higher and the reserves have been heavily used. They now need to be restored. The Trustees have identified several areas of future expenditure (e.g. the heating system).

Over the last 50 years there have been many initiatives to use the Martineau Hall for either Unitarian developmental purposes or to generate revenue. None have enjoyed lasting success.

The increased financial security implicit in the Martineau Hall decision also enhances the General Assembly's security. In the halcyon days, when Essex Hall was generating surplus profits, the General Assembly enjoyed considerable annual cash grants. Essex Hall is at the beginning of a road to recovery that should, in due course, lead to the restoration of grants to the General Assembly.

One extra important decision was made at the meeting. To



The Martineau Hall will be closed and converted into office space. Photo by James Barry.

counterbalance the loss of the Martineau Hall, the Lindsey Room is to be refurbished to include theatre-style meetings of up to 40 persons. Audio-visual aids, a better loop system and new furniture are planned. During this refurbishment, committees will be able to use the Harman Room, presently the staff room.

The Trustees thank all those who expressed their views by encouragement, understanding, criticism and innovative ideas. In 10 years' time we hope that we can all look back and see this as a turning point in the stability and fortunes of Essex Hall and its ability to serve the Unitarian movement.

Martin Gienke, Andrew Mason, Derek McAuley, James McClelland, Alan Ruston, Peter Soulsby and Jeff Teagle, members of the Essex Hall Management Committee.

Essex Hall is a continuing story

By Alan Ruston

The General Assembly's denominational centre as most readers will know is located at Essex Hall in Essex Street off the Strand in London. Much of our central activity comes from there, so much so that when people refer to our national organisation they often just call it 'Essex Hall'. However, many may not know what the term signifies so as someone associated with its running for about 40 years, I thought I'd provide a brief explanation of its history and background.

Essex Hall is built on the site of the first avowed Unitarian congregation formed there by Theophilus Lindsey in 1774. The original worship space was an adapted warehouse which developed over the years to become the locus of a large and active congregation. However, by the 1870s the numbers attending Essex Church were in decline. The Lawrences, a wealthy Unitarian family who had made their money as builders, offered to finance a move to Kensington where a congregation already existed, meeting in an iron church. In 1886 the Essex Church congregation moved to a new gothic-style building in Notting Hill Gate, Kensington.

At the same time the then-central organisation – the British & Foreign Unitarian Association (B&FUA) – was looking

for permanent office space. So offices were built on the Essex Street site to provide a home for the B&FUA and the Sunday School Association.

The new Essex Street was a large rambling office building, owned by an incorporated body of charity trustees whose remit was to provide accommodation to these two bodies for 50 years. Apart from that it had unfettered discretion on its use. There was no mention of Unitarianism as an attempt to create a denomination-owned building in the area had failed in the 1870s due to the implacable opposition of James Martineau to a building dedicated to Unitarian purposes. The new ownership device created no opposition and has remained in the hands of individual Unitarian trustees ever since.

This situation did not alter when the GA was formed in 1928 and joined the B&FUA in Essex Hall. The Hall was bombed and destroyed in 1944, so the GA and other bodies moved to Dr Williams's Library in Gordon Square until a new building was erected in Essex Street in 1958. This was an office building designed by the Unitarian architect Kenneth Tayler, which incorporated a meeting place called the Martineau Hall. The

(Continued on next page)

Talent show a feast for eyes and ears

By Kate Buchanan

Something spectacular happened when Unitarians from north and west London put on a talent show for each other on Valentine's weekend. Members of three Unitarian Chapels – Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel (RHUC), New-Unity (Newington Green and Unity Chapel Islington),

Golders Green Unitarians, plus Unitarian webmaster James Barry – came together at Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in Hampstead giving song, music and poetry performances. And everyone went home with smiles on their faces!

Helene Howard gave a comical rendition of 'No one loves a fairy when she's forty' wearing fancy dress complete with a wonky magic wand. Other memorable acts included lively piano duets, a capella singing and a scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Helene says 'I love being on stage, especially when everyone laughs.'

James performed some of his witty home-brewed rhymes and said he appreciated the camaraderie: 'I enjoyed the happy and supporting atmosphere created by the participants both before and during the show. There was enthusiasm not egos.' For Matthew Smith, the event brought back happy memories, 'It was great to have the opportunity to be part of a Unitarian talent night at Rosslyn Hill for the first time in many years.' Fellow organiser Margaret Perry chose to read a piece by former RHUC Minister Judith Walker-Riggs entitled *Heretical View on Valentine's Day*. But she found it hard to choose her favourite amongst the performers: 'It's very difficult to say – really and truly. But Helene the fairy, is always gorgeous, also the amazing piano duets and Lady Bracknell – see what I mean? It was also good being on stage with the help of Judith Walker-Riggs!' Rosalind Beeton overcame a few nerves to sing a beautiful song by Gabriel Faure. 'I enjoyed the feeling of community sharing our joy and love of the beauty of music



Helene Howard gave a comical rendition of 'No one loves a fairy when she's forty'. Photo by Edmund Connolly

and song,' she said.

Jim Robinson, Rosslyn Hill's outgoing Minister, was so impressed by the Hungarian Dances piano duets played by Georgina Drewe and Ed Connolly that he asked them to perform during the chapel service the following day. The event raised funds which were donated to the General Assembly. Extra donations from the Golders Green Unitarians brought the total to £425 and this was presented to Chief Officer Derek McAuley, who happened to be attending the event. As it is an unrestricted donation, it will be doubled by the Bowland Trust. It just goes to show that there's a little talent in every chapel when you scratch the surface!

Kate Buchanan is a member at Rosslyn Hill.

Essex trustees hope to support movement

(Continued from previous page)

Trust governing it did not alter in form or activity. There was still no mention of Unitarianism, and the trustees had unfettered discretion as to the application of its capital and income. The trustees decided to continue to provide office space for the GA and to support it with surplus income derived from letting the remainder of the building. There was also a bookshop selling denominational and general books open to the public on the ground floor but this closed some decades ago; this has been of recent times a sandwich bar and is now vacant.

The 1958 building was erected with war damage compensation and gifts from Unitarians as well as from the American Unitarian Association. It was not seen as a war memorial or even a place to be occupied by Unitarian groups, although the Strand Congregation, formed in 1958, met there for a few years until it closed, as did the London Welsh congregation. Unitarian groups used the Martineau Hall on an intermittent basis, including the LDPA who were given preference on lettings. Usage has dropped to very small levels in recent times.

Until a few years ago the trustees were able to provide not only office space for the GA, but also often over £50,000 a year to its funds. At one stage it was the largest single source of GA funding. With a change in demand for central London



Essex Hall was built in 1958. Photo by James Barry

office space and a downturn in rents, this sum has dried up. The trustees seek more permanent tenants than they have had in recent times in the hope that income can again be supplied to the Unitarian movement for the continuation and expansion of its work.

Alan Ruston is a trustee of the Essex Hall Trust.

Review: A revelatory look at Eden

Eden, The Buried Treasure
Eve Wood-Langford

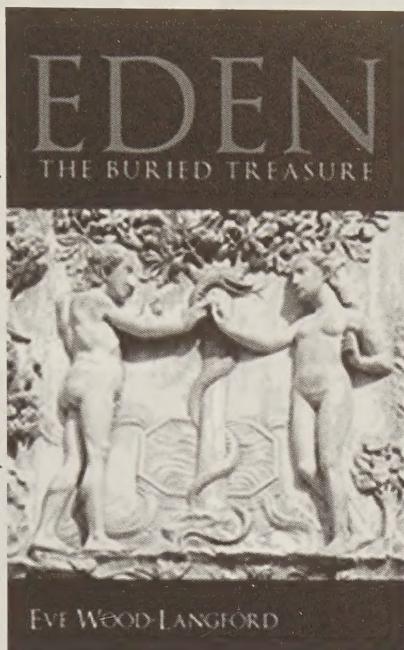
Review by Richard Lovis

Eve Wood-Langford is a Unitarian, and she proclaims her roots clearly both in the introduction to her book and particularly in one of the concluding chapters. Her approach to the ancient biblical stories with which her book chiefly deals is therefore respectful: her appraisal of what Christianity has made of the myths rather more trenchant.

The author summarises how the earlier books of the Old Testament, particularly Genesis and Exodus, are made up of interwoven strands from different recorders of Hebrew history, but her central theme compares the patriarchal legends with Mesopotamian sources from much earlier times, in particular the epic poem, "Gilgamesh".

The points of similarity and difference, which are covered in considerable detail, make very interesting reading. Such comparisons are not new, of course, but what makes this book more than a fresh academic skirmish into familiar territory is the way it deals with how the Jewish authors themselves struggled to uproot the myths from their polytheistic, amoral goddess background and plant them instead into the milieu of their monotheistic, male and ethically based culture.

The worship of the Great Mother Goddess (originally the Earth itself) was a major aspect of the agricultural societies through which the ancient Hebrew people moved as nomadic pastoral farmers for many years, and was the background against which the nascent Hebrew monotheism struggled – sometimes more successfully than at others as parts of the book make clear. The Hebrews didn't become agriculturalists until Moses led them to "the promised land" centuries after the period in which Abraham can be supposed to have left Ur,



leave alone the legendary age against which the story of Adam and Eve is told. Yet when Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden, part of his punishment is "to till the ground" which is clearly an anachronism. Such observations as this are among the many factors that made this book so interesting to me as a novice to this kind of scholarship.

The final third of the book, and to my mind the more significant part, is concerned with how Christianity rather than Judaism has treated the ancient myths. In the monotheistic understanding of the Jews,

Adam and Eve (and indeed the serpent!) were punished for usurping God's monopoly on Wisdom (effectively marking the evolution of human consciousness) by being expelled from the garden. This episode is not depicted as the fall from grace requiring a redeemer that the early church fathers built their theology upon: a theology not shared by the suppressed Gnostic minority, as the author makes clear, for whom enlightenment rather than salvation was the goal in life.

I came to this book with only a rudimentary knowledge both of how the Old Testament was composed and the essential part it played as background for the New Testament. Having read the book I now realise how simplistic my understanding of much of the Old Testament has always been, and how "contrived" much of the New Testament's use of it.

The somewhat arcane material presented in the book may not startle the scholars among us, but to lay people like myself it is nothing short of revelatory and well worth reading.

Eden: The Buried Treasure (Paperback) by Eve Wood-Langford. Published by AuthorHouse. ISBN-10: 1449019528
ISBN-13: 978-1449019525 Available from Amazon.co.uk
Richard Lovis is a member at Plymouth.

Excerpt: Couple at the edge of change

By Eve Wood-Langford

When Darwin's book *On Origin of Species* was published in Victorian England, his view of natural selection engendered shock. Orthodox Christians accepted the Lord's creation of Adam as a fully-conversant adult, and the fashioning of Eve from his rib, thus upholding the story on which was founded the concept of Original Sin. Darwin's theory of human evolution from lesser animals therefore induced sudden and deep confusion, for if the Eden story was not true then all the church's thundering about Original Sin was founded on sand. Moreover, if human beings were not born into sin after all then the church was not *indispensable to salvation*.

Once again the naked couple stood misunderstood at the centre of divisive change. Having survived adaptation into the revolution of Judaic monotheism, and again, differently, into Christian monotheism, Adam and Eve

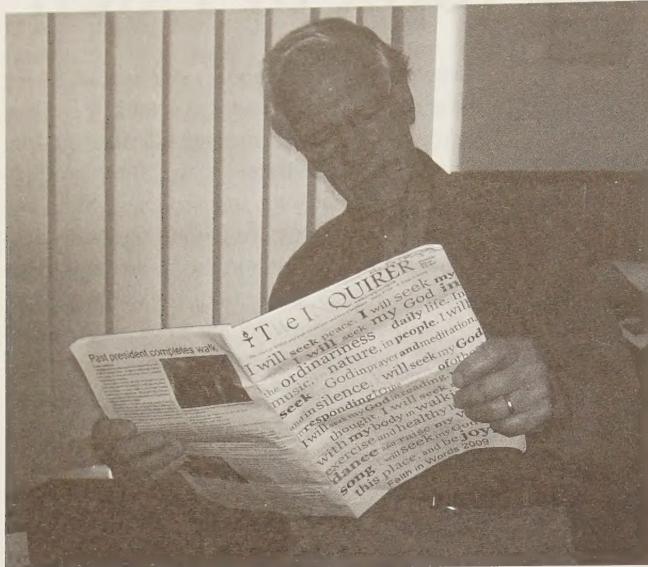
were now illuminated in the revolutionary light of science.

Darwin's theory did not present difficulties to all Christian movements, however, for the Unitarians among others welcomed it as they accept all truths through scientific discovery.

Moreover, when the Eden story was re-examined, not as history but as myth, it was evident that this important creation account was never intended to be understood in literal terms.

What Darwin's theory contravened, therefore, was not a factual record of human creation, but a cherished myth rightly preserved in Genesis, but wrongly interpreted in terms unsympathetic to its origins. Furthermore, when the myth is examined in the pristine light of its Mesopotamian conception, it may be seen to enshrine a long-obscured treasure of truth, an uplifting anthropological record that is *itself a chronicle of evolution*.

News in brief



Minister emeritus has UK links

His many friends, locally and all around the world, will be delighted to learn that for his long and valued service to the Unitarian Community of South Africa, the honorary title of Minister Emeritus will be conferred on the Rev Gordon Oliver (pictured above) on 11 April at Cape Town Unitarian Church. The occasion will be conducted by the Rev Roux Malan and the preacher will be local minister the Rev Peter Fox, who took part in Gordon's induction service along with British Unitarian ministers Celia and John Midgley in 2002.

A former Mayor of Cape Town, during which time he was actively involved in the celebrations on the release of Nelson Mandela, welcoming him to the balcony of Cape Town City Hall 20 years ago, Gordon undertook training for the Unitarian ministry, visiting both Unitarian College and Harris Manchester College. He served the Cape Town congregation as minister for seven years and was the initiator of moves to found a South African Unitarian Association.

He later served as President of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, was involved in the hosting of the World Parliament of Religions in Cape Town and since his retirement he has been involved in the founding of a new Southern Peninsular Unitarian Group which now holds regular monthly meetings. He is also a keen reader of *The Inquirer!* Photo by John Midgley.

DR WILLIAMS'S BURSARY

One BURSARY, tenable at the University of Glasgow, is offered by the Trustees to a candidate from the United Kingdom who is an accredited Minister among Protestant Dissenters for full-time research leading to a PhD degree. Failing a suitable candidate of this kind, the trustees would consider an applicant for a Master's degree.

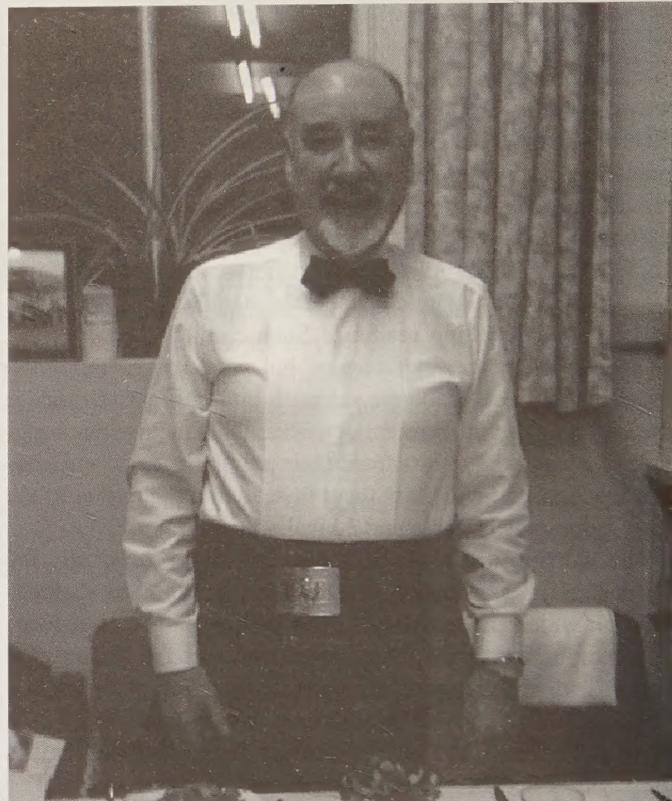
The value of the Bursary is c. £13,000, plus University fees and accommodation.

Applications by May 31st to the Director, from whom further information can be obtained.

Dr David Wykes,
Director, Dr Williams's Trust
14 Gordon Square
London WC1H 0AR

Worship Panel celebrates

The Worship Panel/Committee/Subcommittee has its 40th birthday this year. Unitarian services are very different now and much more creative because of its work. So we are planning a celebration at the General Assembly meetings. It may include fizzy wine. It will certainly include a telling of the panel's story: how it came to be and what it has achieved. If anyone has suitable materials – photos for an exhibition perhaps or an anecdote to tell – please let me know soon. Joy Croft, Convenor, Unitarian Worship Panel, 5 The Chaplain's House, Bishopgate Norwich, NR1 4EJ. Tel: 01603 621947 Or email: joy.croft@tiscali.co.uk



Dr Bill Brown, organist and choirmaster of the Old Meeting House, Mansfield, hosting a Burns Night supper at the chapel at which 42 people sat down to a traditional meal of broth, haggis, neeps and tatties, before a tribute (including a selection of songs written by Burns himself) was presented.

Meditational Fellowship Weekend

Join Unitarians and others at the Meditational Fellowship weekend

August 13-15, 2010
at Holland House, near Evesham

Run by David Monk and Richard Bober with help from others

For forms and details ring
Brenda Knopf 02380 555333